

# THE MAKING OF THE SERMON

For the classroom and the study

T. Harwood Pattison

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## CHAPTER ONE

### WHAT IS PREACHING?

#### SUMMARY

**DEFINITION.** Preaching is the spoken communication of divine truth with a view to persuasion.

#### I. THE MATTER OF PREACHING: "DIVINE TRUTH."

*1. The limit of preaching.* It must be the proclamation and enforcement of divine truth:

- (1) The delivery of a message from God to man;
- (2) The message must concern itself with religion;
- (3) It should be founded upon Scripture;
- (4) It must be in sympathy with both God and man.

*2. The extent of preaching.* Divine truth cannot be all communicated in one sermon. With many doctrines of the Christian religion the sermon may deal only indirectly. Narrow views of the scope of the sermon deprecated.

*3. The authority for preaching.* Concerned with positive truth.

The pulpit no place for intellectual doubts, for matters purely speculative, or for negations. Its true mission.

#### II. THE MANNER IN WHICH THE COMMUNICATION IS MADE

It is "spoken." Demands, speaker and an audience.

*1. As to the speaker:*

- (1) It is the will of God that truth shall be communicated in this way;
- (2) It is also natural.

*2. As to the audience:*

(1) The audience must be kept in view while the sermon is being prepared;  
(2) The audience must be respected. The preacher who fails to gain the attention of his hearers should ask himself:

- (a) Have I felt the importance of my vocation?
- (b) Have I preached upon subjects of human interest?
- (c) Have I made suitable preparation?

(3) The audience should be interested at once;  
(4) The interest should be maintained to the end.

### **III. THE PURPOSE OF PREACHING: “WITH A VIEW TO PERSUASION.”**

The principal kinds of pulpit address:

- 1. Familiar discourse. Two words used for this in the New Testament, “*talked*,” “*preached*.”
- 2. Rhetorical discourse. Two words used for this in the New Testament. Both translated “*preach*.”
- 3. Argumentative discourse. New Testament word for this.

Other words employed for preaching in the New Testament, “*teaching*,” “*testifying*,” “*beseeking*.”

#### **The Matter of Preaching**

PREACHING is the spoken communication of divine truth with a view to persuasion. Accepting this as a sufficient definition, we notice that it covers the three points of Preaching with which we are chiefly concerned in a sermon, namely: its matter, its manner, and its purpose.

- As to the matter of this communication, it is “*divine truth*.” This tells us what to preach.
- As to the manner of this communication, it is divine truth “*spoken*.” This tells us how to preach.
- As to the purpose of this communication, it is divine truth spoken “*with a view to persuasion*.” This tells us why we preach.

I. Turning first to the matter of preaching, we say that it must be “*divine truth*.” We find here the limit and the extent of preaching, as well as its authority.

1. What then is the limit of Christian preaching? Christian preaching is limited to the proclamation and enforcement of the truth of God. Strictly speaking, it is not arguing, still less is it speculating about truth.

(1) *Simply it is the delivery of a message from God to man.* The two great pulpit orators of a hundred years ago, Robert Hall and Thomas Chalmers, discovered this only after they had struck other notes in vain. In the early days of his ministry Robert Hall, as he himself tells us, imitated Robert Robinson, his fascinating predecessor at Cambridge.

Chalmers built up splendid apologies for a Christian system in which he himself only half believed. It was when these methods were exchanged for the simpler proclamation of the truth of God that alike Hall and Chalmers found their vocation. So of Mr. Spurgeon it has been said, "To him Christianity was not an argument, but a message; not something to be discussed, but something to be delivered by the preacher and instantaneously accepted by the hearer."

The preacher who does his work under this persuasion will be saved from two evils.

- He will get rid of the painful self-consciousness with which many speakers are afflicted.
- He will also be delivered from a slavish and time-serving spirit.

*He will get rid of the painful self-consciousness with which many speakers are afflicted.* He may not rise indeed to the heroic condition of Archbishop Whately who, when he was asked whether he was nervous on the occasion of his first sermon, answered, "I dared not be. To think of myself at such a time would be in my eyes not only a weakness, but a sin." But he will be likely to attain the safer spirit which moved Adolphe Monod to begin one of his sermons with the prayer: "O my God, give me thy Spirit, that so I may lay down at the foot of the cross of thy Son that searching of myself and that disquietude which have overcome me for these three days, to the detriment of my sermon."

Convinced that he is the messenger of God, *he will also be delivered from a slavish and time-serving spirit.* That no man can serve two masters is nowhere truer than it is in the pulpit. There one is our master, even Christ.

"Out of the pulpit," John Knox said to Mary Queen of Scots, when she complained that never had prince been handled as she was by him in his sermons, "few had occasion to be offended with him; but there he was not master of himself, but bound to obey Him who commanded him to speak plainly, and to flatter no flesh on the face of the earth."

(2) *A further limitation is that Christian preaching concerns itself with religion.* We may refuse to put any narrow or dogmatic interpretation upon the term "*religion*"; but nothing can take the place of the thing itself in our sermons. It was the severest condemnation which Louis XVI. of France passed upon one of his chaplains when he said, "This preacher would have left nothing out of his sermon if he had happened to touch upon religion."

The preacher is called to preach the Gospel of Christ, and not to lecture on literature or politics or economical questions. The warning given by Dr. John Watson is especially needed at a time when the temptation to forget this seems to be as plausible as it is subtle: "When under the shadow of a great trouble or in the throes of a terrible temptation, little consolation or help will be gained from a discourse on drains or a pulpit review of the latest popular book."

"I do not go to church," said Daniel Webster, after enduring the infliction of an ambitious but useless sermon, "to learn history, but to be reminded of duty." The famous orator was of the same mind as a worshiper in Westminster Abbey, who complained after listening to a sermon from Dean Stanley, "I went to hear the way to Heaven; I was told the way to Palestine."

(3) *We mention another limitation when we add that our preaching should be founded upon Scripture, and not upon its words so much as upon its doctrines.* The old Puritan saying, “You cannot give God’s children too much of their Father’s bread;” expressed a truth to which all the history of the church bears witness. The Protestant Reformation, reviving the popular faith in the supreme authority of the Bible, insisted simultaneously upon the paramount necessity for making the truth revealed therein the staple of the message of the pulpit.

(4) *It follows that the sermon must be in very close touch both with God and man.* As Tholuck said, a sermon ought to have “Heaven for its father and earth for its mother.” Looking at the circumstances of our daily life exclusively in the light which springs from below, or failing to bring heavenly realities down “to men’s business and bosoms,” many a sermon carries in itself the assurance of failure. The true preacher must be “great not in wealth of eloquence alone, or profundity of learning, not in charm of style only, or justness of expression, but great with the effective greatness of power to bring the infinite remedy of the pity of God into close contact with the infinitely varied needs of man.”

2. We are still dealing with the matter of preaching when we glance at its extent.

Beware of taking narrow views here. Preaching is the communication of divine truth to man, and just because the ocean is so vast and his vessel so small no sailor should attempt to compass his task in one voyage. The young preacher, like the young traveler, is apt to attempt too much; and in both cases, the result is the same.

A confused impression of many things referred to or suggested takes the place of one compact thought. The speaker has been so anxious to say everything that he has really said nothing. As Daniel Webster complained of an opponent in the court, he has “hovered but not pitched.” When the Spaniards would describe a tedious writer they say, “He leaves nothing in his inkstand.” So the preacher often fails because he leaves nothing for next time. To begin in the Garden of Eden and close only in the New Jerusalem is the weakness of many a sermon which would achieve more if it attempted less. A sermon may deal by implication only, or only indirectly, with many of the doctrines of Christianity - with the fall of man, the redemption of Christ, the dispensation of the Spirit, for example, and yet be a sermon.

3. The authority for the sermon lies in the fact that the preacher is a messenger who delivers to his congregation the word of God. “That’s the man for me,” David Hume remarked when he heard Ebenezer Erskine. “He means what he says; he speaks as if Jesus Christ was at his elbow.”

Because he is charged with God’s message to men, the preacher is concerned with positive truth.

(1) The pulpit is no place in which to ventilate intellectual doubt. “Give me the benefit of your convictions if you have any,” was the demand of Goethe, “but keep your doubts to yourself, for I have enough of my own.”

(2) Nor should the sermon deal with matters purely speculative. The dogmatic tone is the right tone for a preacher so long as he speaks with the accent of conviction. His reason for being in the pulpit is that he has the word of the Lord to deliver to his hearers.

(3) Nor, again, is the sermon to be negative in its character. The sermon which is occupied chiefly with saying what the text does not mean, provokes, indeed, but not to love or to good works. “ You must preach positively, telling your hearer what is true, setting God before his heart, and bidding it know its Lord.” - Phillips Brooks.

By all means study the Sermons of the New Testament, and especially those in the early chapters of the Acts of the Apostles. “The glorious fact, ‘**By this man is preached unto you the forgiveness of sins,**’ is the burden of every sermon.” - McCheyne.

## The Manner of Preaching

**II. Recalling our definition of preaching as “*the spoken communication of divine truth,*” we come, next, to the manner in which this communication is made. It is “spoken.”**

This distinguishes it from other ways in which truth may be communicated to men, such as the ordinances and ritual of religion; the arts of music and painting; the printed page; or even the simple force of Christian example.

It demands two things, namely:

- A speaker and
- An audience

1. As to the speaker. That man should be reached by the medium of human speech is the will of God. (Romans 10:4).

*(1) This seems to be conclusively shown by the whole history of preaching.*

Notwithstanding the assertions to the contrary which are made by the Romanist and the Ritualist, we believe with one of the most devoted bishops of the Episcopal Church that “this age wants and is prepared to receive not the priest, but the prophet.” - Bishop Fraser. It will be well to turn at this point to the testimony of the first days of Christianity. Nowhere was there an appeal to sacraments, or to the scenic effect of splendid ceremonies, or to any set form of service. The sermon of Peter on the day of Pentecost gave to the church the manner in which the message from Heaven was to reach the hearts of men. “**with many other words did he testify and exhort**” (Acts 2:40). See also Acts 8:4, 12; 10:36; 11:19, 20; 15:35; 20:25; 28:31; Romans 16:25; I Corinthians 1:18-21; 2:4; II Corinthians 10:14; Galatians 1:23; II Timothy 4:17; Titus 1:13.

*(2) We also remark that it is most natural that divine truth should be communicated by speech.*

Men are likely to be touched and affected by their fellow-men. No doubt for this among other reasons it was that “**the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.**”

“Eloquence,” as Emerson says, “is the appropriate organ of the highest personal energy.”

Four things may here be said as to the preacher himself:

(a) *He should be thoroughly human.* Luther tried to preach so as to suit the poor women, children, and servants. Roger Ascham said, "We ought to think like great men and speak like common people." As Channing grew to the pulpit his address constantly "became less ministerial and more manly." "To me," says Longfellow, "a sermon is no sermon in which I cannot hear the heart beat." Beecher held that preaching was "the application of personal emotion and thought to living people; the power of one living man to lay himself on the heart and intelligence of another."

(b) *The preacher should be naturally qualified to speak.* Training may do much, but the true preacher like the true poet is born before he is made.

(c) *He should be morally and spiritually qualified to speak the message of God to man.* Preaching is a divine ordinance; and beaten oil is called for in the service of the sanctuary; .Nothing else can take the place of consecrated character. Gladstone, recalling the far-distant day when he listened to Chalmers, says: "I never heard anyone preach who more completely conveyed his own moral character through the medium of every sentence he spoke."

(d) *He should be satisfied to deliver his message.* Personal ambition, self-consciousness, a striving after display, should all be excluded from the pulpit. Hazlitt remarks about Rembrandt's picture of "Jacob's Ladder," that had the painter thought once about himself or anything but the subject, "the dream had fled, the spell had been broken."

The preacher must hide behind his message, for "the most effective preaching consists not only in words about the Lord, but, in a sense, of words from the Lord. The most difficult and important duty of the preacher's self-discipline is self-effacement." - Joseph Cook.

2. As to the audience, it seems to me of the first importance that the preacher keep his congregation well in view during the preparation of his sermon.

(1) It will be wise in him to remember Patrick Henry's words and apply them to his own vocation. "Sir, it is not books, it is men that we must study." Robert Hall held that without being personal a good sermon should be composed so that the conscience of the audience should feel the hand of the preacher searching it, and every individual know where to class himself; and Henry Ward Beecher uttered a truth which any preacher who is tempted to isolate himself in his study must lay to heart, when he said, "I dedicated myself not to be a fisher of ideas nor of books, but a fisher of men."

At first it will be a difficult thing to realize an audience which is not present. But by constant practice it becomes easy. Guthrie spoke each sentence aloud before writing it down, and in that way acquired an admirable pulpit style. In his hours of composition he managed to keep an audience always before him, and "realized the influence of a crowd even in the solitude of his study."

(2) *The audience must be respected.* When a congregation is listless, indifferent, and hard to interest, the temptation is strong with the preacher to lay the blame at every door sooner than at his own. But he should reflect that preaching is oratory, and oratory is an art which always and everywhere delights; and that preaching deals with religion, and religion (as Thomas Binney was wont to say) is what people care most to hear about. Let him rather look nearer home, and ask, Have I felt the importance of my vocation? "It is no light thing to speak before men in the place of God" - Luther.

The man who could say with reason of his clergyman, diligent everywhere but in his parish, "Our minister makes a by-job of our souls," passed the severest sentence to which any preacher can expose himself. If he has failed to feel the importance of his vocation he will very likely neglect his pulpit preparation; and in that case he may deserve the retort with which an easy-going preacher was met when he boasted one morning at the breakfast table that he had already written a sermon and killed a salmon: "It may be so; but I had rather eat your salmon than hear your sermon."

Possibly he has fallen into an error at which we have already glanced, and chosen for his themes subjects of no vital human interest.

A book was found not long since in one of the rooms of Exeter Cathedral which dated from about 1301, and contained, among other things, the complaints of attendants at public worship. One vicar was criticized because his preaching was "very poor and after a fashion of his own"; while of another it was reported that "he did not inform his hearers very much." The critics of our sermons still find only too much reason for urging these ancient objections.

(3) *Let me add that the preacher should endeavor to interest his hearers at once.* What Hooker says of extemporaneous sermons is true of all sermons, however composed and delivered; "They spend their lives at their birth." By his manner in the pulpit, and by the way in which he conducts the service even before the sermon is reached, let the preacher come into sympathetic touch with his congregation.

The space granted to him is short in which "to invite men drenched in time to recover themselves, and come out of time and taste their native immortal air" (R. W. Emerson, "*Life*," p. 308).

To quote a few words from a noble passage in John Ruskin's "*Stones of Venice*," the whole of which should be read: "When breathless and weary with the week's labor they give the preacher this interval of imperfect and languid hearing, he has but thirty minutes to get at the separate hearts of a thousand men, to convince them of all their weaknesses, to shame them from all their sins, to warn them of all their dangers, to try, by this way and that, to stir the hard fastenings of those doors where the Master himself has stood and knocked, yet none opened, and to call at the openings of those dark streets where Wisdom herself has stretched forth her hands, and no man regarded. Thirty minutes to raise the dead in." (Vol. II., p. 25).

What the preacher does must indeed be done quickly.

(4) *This interest the preacher must aim to hold to the very close of his discourse.* Let him make his sermon an articulated whole; let him cultivate rhetorical climax; let him see to it that his composition cumulates in force and closeness of application as it draws near to its close; and when it is finished let him ask himself whether it has in it a message to each part of the entire nature.

Guthrie demanded in every sermon what he called “the three P’s,” Proving, Painting, Persuading.

In other words, let the preacher address *the reason, the imagination, and the heart.* The sermon which lacks in anyone of these three is sure to fail in interesting some hearers.

## **The Purpose of Preaching**

### **III. More briefly we may now deal with the purpose of preaching.**

The sermon is framed “*with a view to persuasion.*”

1. The aim which the preacher sets before him is the salvation and upbuilding of his hearers.

We prefer to say this rather than to lay the chief stress upon the obligation to believe under which the preaching of the gospel indisputably places those who hear it. The emphasis is on interest rather than on duty; the voice which speaks is the voice of love rather than of law.

“The teaching of Christ and the apostles was that God wanted all men to be saved, and made overtures to them.” - H. W. Beecher.

This alone does justice to the spirit of the New Testament, and to the happy phrase, “An instinct for souls,” (E. Paxton Hood) which has been offered as a definition of the preacher’s vocation from the day of Pentecost until now. Let the sermon record the achievements of this instinct. It may even be well that occasionally during his ministry the preacher keep a record of the reason why every sermon is prepared. Each discourse will then be the embodiment and expression of a definite purpose.

2. In order to persuade men to believe, every form of discourse must be used.

The New Testament gives us three distinct kinds of pulpit address. The first is familiar discourse, or what we understand as the homily. This is that easy and graceful conversation to which so few preachers attain. It does not condescend to words of low estate. It is as free from vulgarity as it is from commonplace. The perfect mastery of this style marks the preacher who wields the most effective eloquence. Of Francis of Assisi, his disciple, Thomas of Spalato, said, “He had not the manner of a preacher, his ways were rather those of a conversation”; and Butler, in “*Hudibras*,” meant it as no sarcasm when he wrote of one of his characters;

And when with greatest art he spoke  
You’d think he talked like other folk.

For this familiar kind of discourse, two words are used in the New Testament, translated “talked” (Acts 20:11) and “teaching” (Mark 2:2; John 3:26, 27).

Upon this first word the conception of the homily is based, and the preacher must keep it in mind as best describing what the staple of his sermon work should be.

The second kind of pulpit address is rhetorical discourse, a more formal, studied, and impassioned declaration of God’s will. This again is represented by two words, both translated “**preach**” in our English Bible. The first, which is used fifty times, means *to announce*, and is found, for example, in Matthew 11:5, “**the poor have the gospel preached to them**”; the second, which is used sixty times, carries the idea of *the proclamation of a message*, as in Mark 16:15, “**preach the gospel to every creature.**”

A third and less frequent kind of pulpit address is that which puts the chief stress on the argument; and is rendered in our version either “**preached**” or “**reasoned.**” With Felix Paul “**reasoned of righteousness, temperance, and judgment to come**” (Acts 24:25), and it was under argumentative preaching that Eutychus fell into a deep sleep, which may perhaps account for the fact that when the young man was brought to life again Paul “**talked**” a long while (Acts 20:9, 11). Familiar discourse will hold the attention when more elaborate argument acts as an almost fatal soporific.

Besides these words, the Bible indicates “**teaching**” (Matthew 28:19), “**testifying**” (Acts 2:40), and “**beseeking**” (II Corinthians 5:20) as other forms of discourse. By no one of all these to the exclusion of the others should the preacher approach the walls of Mansoul and summon the occupant to surrender. With the even level of familiar address let him talk and teach; in more precise forms of speech let him reason of the great truths of salvation; now and again, rising into impassioned language, let him announce the good tidings, let him give rein to the impetuosity of his emotions, let him testify against those who harden their hearts before the pleadings of the divine mercy; and oftener still, as one who knows the fear of the Lord, let him persuade men, beseeching them in Christ’s stead to be reconciled to God.

“Apostolic preaching was a combination of all these processes, saturated with prayers and tears”  
- Dr. J. Angus.

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